

On the Shows*

You servants of God about to draw near to God that you may make solemn consecration of yourselves to Him,¹ seek well to understand the condition of faith, the reasons of the Truth, and the laws of Christian discipline, which forbid— among other sins of the world— the pleasures of the public shows. You who have testified and confessed that you have done so already, review the subject, that there may be no sinning, whether through real or willful ignorance.

For such is the power of earthly pleasures that, to retain the opportunity of still partaking of them, it contrives to prolong a willing ignorance and bribes knowledge into playing a dishonest part. To both things, perhaps, some among you are allured by the views of the heathens, who in this matter want to press us with arguments, such as these: (1) that the exquisite enjoyments of ear and eye that we have in things external are not in the least opposed to religion in the mind and conscience; and (2) that surely no offence is offered to God in any human enjoyment, by any of our pleasures, which is not sinful to partake of in its own time and place with all due honor and reverence secured to Him.

But this is precisely what we are ready to prove: that these things are not consistent with true religion and true obedience to the true God.

There are some who imagine that Christians, a sort of people ever ready to die, are trained into the abstinence they practice, with no other object than that of making it less difficult to despise life — the fastenings to it being severed as it were — quenching all desire for what, so far as they are concerned, they have emptied of all that is desirable. And so it is thought to be rather a thing of human planning

and foresight than clearly laid down by divine command. It would be a grievous thing indeed for Christians, while continuing in the enjoyment of pleasures so great, to die for God! It is not as they say....

Then, again, everyone is ready with the argument that all things, as we teach, were created by God and given to man for his use and that they must be good, as coming all from so good a source and that, among them, are found the various constituent elements of the public shows, such as the horse, the lion, bodily strength, and musical voice. It cannot, then, be thought that what exists by God's own creative will is either foreign or hostile to Him. And if it is not opposed to Him, it cannot be regarded as injurious to His worshippers, as certainly it is not foreign to them.

Beyond all doubt, too, the very buildings connected with the places of public amusement, composed as they are of rocks, stones, marbles, and pillars, are things of God, who has given these various things for the earth's embellishment. No, the very scenes are enacted under God's own heaven.

How skilful a pleader seems human wisdom to herself — especially if she has the fear of losing any of her delights, any of the sweet enjoyments of worldly existence!

...Now nobody denies what nobody is ignorant of — for Nature herself is teacher of it — that God is the Maker of the universe and that it is good and that it is man's by free gift of its Maker. But having no intimate acquaintance with the Highest, knowing Him only by natural revelation and not as His "friends"... men cannot but be in ignorance alike of what He enjoins and what He forbids in regard to the administration of His world. They must be ignorant, too, of the hostile power that works against Him and perverts to wrong uses the things His hand has formed. For you cannot

*The entire book can be read here:

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.iv.v.html>

¹ He may be addressing those about to be baptized.

know either the will or the adversary of a God you do not know. We must not, then, consider merely by whom all things were made but also by whom they have been perverted. We shall find out for what use they were made at first, when we find for what [use] they were not [made].

There is a vast difference between the corrupted state and that of primal purity, just as there is a vast difference between the Creator and the Corrupter. Why, all sorts of evils, which as undoubtedly evil even the heathens prohibit and against which they guard themselves, come from the works of God. Take, for instance, murder, whether committed by iron, by poison, or by magical enchantments. Iron and herbs and demons are all equally creatures of God. Has the Creator, then, provided these things for man's destruction? No, He puts His prohibition on every sort of man-killing by that one summary precept, "You shall not kill." Moreover, who else but God, the Maker of the world, put in it its gold, brass, silver, ivory, wood, and all the other materials used in the manufacture of idols? Yet has He done this that men may set up worship in opposition to Himself? On the contrary, idolatry, in His eyes, is the crowning sin. What is there offensive to God that is not God's? But in offending Him, it ceases to be His; and in ceasing to be His, it is in His eyes an offending thing. Man himself, guilty as he is of every iniquity, is not only a work of God, he is His image, and yet both in soul and body he has severed himself from his Maker. For we did not get eyes to serve lust nor the tongue for speaking evil nor ears to be the receptacle of evil speech nor the throat to serve the vice of gluttony nor the belly to be gluttony's ally nor the genitals for unchaste excesses nor hands for deeds of violence nor the feet for an erring life. Or was the soul placed in the body that it might become a thought-factory of snares and fraud and injustice? I think not; for if God, as the righteous demander of innocence, hates everything like malignity — if He hates utterly such plotting of evil, it is clear beyond a doubt that, of all things

that have come from His hand, He has made none to lead to works which He condemns, even though these same works may be carried on by things of His making. For, in fact, it is the one ground of condemnation that the creature misuses the creation.

We, therefore, who in our knowledge of the Lord have obtained some knowledge also of His foe — who, in our discovery of the Creator, have at the same time laid hands upon the great Corrupter — ought neither to wonder nor to doubt that — as the prowess of the corrupting and God-opposing angel overthrew in the beginning the virtue of man, the work and image of God, the possessor of the world — so he has entirely changed man's nature — created, like his own, for perfect sinlessness — into his own state of wicked enmity against his Maker, so that in the very thing whose gift to man but not to him had grieved him, he might make man guilty in God's eyes and set up his own supremacy.

Fortified by this knowledge against heathen views, let us rather turn to the unworthy reasonings of our own people; for the faith of some, either too simple or too scrupulous, demands direct authority from Scripture for giving up the shows and holds out that the matter is a doubtful one because such abstinence is not clearly and in words imposed upon God's servants.

Well, we never find it expressed with the same precision, "You shall not enter the circus or theatre; you shall not look on combat or a show," as it is plainly laid down, "You shall not kill; you shall not worship an idol; you shall not commit adultery or fraud." But we find that the first word of David bears on this very sort of thing: "Blessed," he says, "is the man who has not gone into the assembly of the impious nor stood in the way of sinners nor sat in the seat of scorners."² Though he seems to have predicted beforehand about that just man³ who took no

² Ps 1:1

³ Perhaps he was speaking about Nicodemus.

part in the meetings and deliberations of the Jews [who were] taking counsel about the slaying of our Lord, yet divine Scripture has ever far-reaching applications. After the immediate sense has been exhausted, in all directions it fortifies the practice of the religious life, so that here also you have an utterance that is not far from a plain prohibition of the shows. If he called those few Jews an “assembly of the wicked”, how much more will he so designate so vast a gathering of heathens! Are the heathens less impious, less sinners, less enemies of Christ than the Jews were then?... Therefore,... it holds, unblessed is he who has entered any council of wicked men and has stood in any way of sinners and has sat in any chair of scorners. We may understand a thing as spoken generally, even when it requires a certain special interpretation to be given to it. For some things spoken with a special reference contain in them general truth. When God admonishes the Israelites of their duty or sharply reproveth them, He has surely a reference to all men; when He threatens destruction to Egypt and Ethiopia, He surely pre-condemns every sinning nation whatsoever. If, reasoning from *species* to *genus*, every nation that sins against them is an Egypt and Ethiopia, so also, reasoning from *genus* to *species*, with reference to the origin of shows, every show is an “assembly of the wicked”.

...⁴

...“What, then,” you say, “shall I be in danger of pollution if I go to the circus when the games are not being celebrated?” There is no law forbidding the mere places to us. For not only the places for show-gatherings but even the temples may be entered without any peril of his religion by the servant of God, if he has only some honest reason for it, unconnected with their proper business and official duties.

⁴ Tertullian proceeds to give a very thorough history of the games (from the secular history books of the day) in an attempt to show that they are idolatrous in origin and that elements of these idolatrous origins still exist in the present day decorations, processions, and pageantry, calling them at one point “demon conventions”.

Why, even the streets and the marketplace and the baths and the taverns and our very dwelling-places are not altogether free from idols. Satan and his angels have filled the whole world. It is not by merely being in the world, however, that we lapse from God but by touching and tainting ourselves with the world’s sins. I shall break with my Maker, that is, by going to the Capitol or the temple of Serapis to sacrifice or adore, as I shall also do by going as a spectator to the circus and the theatre. The places in themselves do not contaminate but what is done in them; from this even the places themselves, we maintain, become defiled. The polluted things pollute us....

...⁵

We have, I think, faithfully carried out our plan of showing in how many different ways the sin of idolatry clings to the shows, in respect to their origins, their titles, their equipments, their places of celebration, and their arts; and we may hold it as a thing beyond all doubt, that for us who have twice renounced all idols,⁶ they are utterly unsuitable. “Not that an idol is anything,”⁷ as the Apostle says, but that the homage they render is to demons, who are the real occupants of these consecrated images, whether of dead men or (as they think) of gods. On this account, therefore..., we abstain from both idolatries.

Nor do we dislike the temples less than the monuments. We have nothing to do with either altar, we adore neither image. We do not offer sacrifices to the gods, and we make no funeral oblations to the departed. No, we do not partake of what is offered either in the one

⁵ Tertullian returns to describing the idolatrous roots of the various performances at the circus, such as the meaning behind the chariot decorations, etc.

Then he moves to similarly analyze the theater shows, noting that by performing shows in what were officially temples of Venus, the performers were able to avoid censorship and act out immoral acts legally.

After, he proceeds to discuss the origin of gladiatorial games, gymnastics, and the feeding of prisoners to wild beasts.

⁶ Early Christians renounced idols as part of the liturgy of baptism.
⁷ 1 Co 8:4

case or the other, for we cannot partake of God's feast and the feast of devils.⁸ If, then, we keep throat and belly free from such defilements, how much more do we withhold our nobler parts, our ears and eyes, from the idolatrous and funereal enjoyments, which are not passed through the body but are digested in the very spirit and soul — whose purity, much more than that of our bodily organs, God has a right to claim from us.

Having sufficiently established the charge of idolatry, which alone ought to be reason enough for our giving up the shows, let us now... look at the subject in another way, for the sake of those especially who keep themselves comfortable in the thought that the abstinence we urge is not in so many words commanded — as if, in the condemnation of the lusts of the world, there was not involved a sufficient declaration against all these amusements. For as there is a lust of money or rank or eating or impure enjoyment or glory, so there is also a lust of pleasure. But the show is just a sort of pleasure. I think, then, that under the general designation of lusts, pleasures are included; in like manner, under the general idea of pleasures, you have as a specific class the "shows"....

...God has enjoined us to deal calmly, gently, quietly, and peacefully with the Holy Spirit, because these things are alone in keeping with the goodness of His nature — with His tenderness and sensitiveness — and not to vex Him with rage, ill-nature, anger, or grief. Well, how shall this be made to accord with the shows? For the show always leads to spiritual agitation, since where there is pleasure, there is keenness of feeling giving pleasure its zest. And where there is keenness of feeling, there is rivalry giving in turn its zest to that. Then, too, where you have rivalry, you have rage, bitterness, wrath, and grief, with all bad things which flow from them — the whole entirely out of keeping with the religion of Christ.

For even suppose that one should enjoy the shows in a moderate way, as befits his rank, age, or nature — still, he is not undisturbed in mind, without some unuttered movings of the inner man. No one partakes of pleasures such as these without their strong excitements; no one comes under their excitements without their natural lapses. These lapses, again, create passionate desire. If there is no desire, there is no pleasure....

Moreover, a man pronounces his own condemnation in the very act of taking his place among those with whom, by his disinclination to be like them, he confesses he has no sympathy. It is not enough that we do no such things ourselves, unless we break all connection also with those who do. "If you saw a thief," says the Scripture, "you consented with him."⁹ Would that we did not even inhabit the same world with these wicked men! But though that wish cannot be realized, yet even now we are separate from them in what is of the world; for the world is God's, but the worldly is the devil's.

Since, then, all passionate excitement is forbidden us, we are debarred from every kind of spectacle, and especially from the circus, where such excitement presides as in its proper element. See the people coming to it already under strong emotion, already tumultuous, already passion-blind, already agitated about their bets. The praetor is too slow for them: their eyes are ever rolling as though along with the lots in his urn; then they hang all eager on the signal; there is the united shout of a common madness. Observe how "out of themselves" they are by their foolish speeches. "He has thrown it!" they exclaim; and they announce each one to his neighbor what all have seen.... And the result, accordingly, is that they fly into rages and passions and discords and all that they who are consecrated to peace ought never to indulge in. Then there are curses and reproaches, with no cause of hatred; there are cries of applause, with nothing to merit

⁸ 1 Co 10:21

⁹ Ps 49:18

them. What are the partakers in all this... to obtain of it for themselves? Unless, it may be, that which makes them not their own — they are saddened by another's sorrow, they are gladdened by another's joy. Whatever they desire on the one hand or detest on the other is entirely foreign to themselves. So love with them is a useless thing, and hatred is unjust. Or is a causeless love perhaps more legitimate than a causeless hatred? God certainly forbids us to hate even with a reason for our hating; for He commands us to love our enemies. God forbids us to curse, even if there may be some ground for doing so, in commanding that those who curse us we are to bless. But what is more merciless than the circus, where people do not spare even their rulers and fellow-citizens? If any of its madnesses are fitting elsewhere in the saints of God, they will be seemly in the circus too; but if they are nowhere right, so neither are they there.

Are we not, in like manner, enjoined to put away from us all immodesty? On this ground, again, we are excluded from the theatre, which is immodesty's own peculiar abode, where nothing is in repute but what elsewhere is disreputable.... So the best path to the highest favor of its god is the vileness that... the buffoon in woman's clothes exhibits, destroying all natural modesty, so that they blush more readily at home than at the play.... The very harlots, too, victims of the public lust, are brought upon the stage;... they are paraded publicly before every age and every rank — their abode, their gains, their praises, are set forth — and that even in the hearing of those who should not hear such things. I say nothing about other matters, for which it would be good to hide them away in their own darkness and their own gloomy caves, lest they should stain the light of day. Let the Senate, let all ranks, blush for very shame! ...But if we ought to abominate all that is immodest, on what ground is it right to hear what we must not speak? For all licentiousness of speech — no, every idle word — is condemned by God. Why, in the same way, is it right to look on what it is

disgraceful to do? How is it that the things that defile a man in going out of his mouth are not regarded as doing so when they go in at his eyes and ears — when eyes and ears are the immediate attendants on the spirit...? You have the theatre forbidden, then, in the forbidding of immodesty. If, again, we despise the teaching of secular literature as being foolishness in God's eyes, our duty is plain enough in regard to those spectacles, which from this source derive the tragic or comic play. If tragedies and comedies are the bloody and wanton, the impious and licentious inventors of crimes and lusts, it is not good even that there should be any calling to remembrance the atrocious or the vile. What you reject in deed, you are not to bid welcome to in word.

...¹⁰

But what a spectacle is that fast-approaching coming of our Lord, now owned by all, now highly exalted, now a triumphant One! What that exultation of the angelic hosts! What the glory of the rising saints! What the kingdom of the just thereafter! What the city New Jerusalem!

Yes, and there are other sights: that last day of judgment..., that day unlooked for by the nations, the theme of their derision, when the world white with age and all its many products shall be consumed in one great flame! How vast a spectacle then bursts upon the eye! What there excites my admiration? what my derision? Which sight gives me joy? which rouses me to exultation? ...What quaestor or priest in his generousness will bestow on you the favor of seeing and exulting in such things as these?

¹⁰ Tertullian next writes against violence and the sin of taking pleasure in other's — even the guilty's — suffering.

He then speaks of the inconsistency of people who will do something or watch something at a show that they would never do or watch elsewhere.

He next speaks of the spiritual danger — both from God's judgment and the attacks of demons.

Finally, he reminds Christians that true pleasure is found in God, not in the present world.

Tertullian

...And yet even now we, in a measure, have them by faith in the picturings of imagination. But what are the things that eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and that have not so much as dimly dawned upon the human heart? Whatever they are, they are nobler, I believe, than circus, and both theaters, and every racecourse.